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# Turning Points: Stories of Passion and Leadership in the South Carolina Midlands

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TURNING POINTS: STORIES OF PASSION AND LEADERSHIP IN  
THE SOUTH CAROLINA MIDLANDS

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Senior Thesis Written Component

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation with Honors from the  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

“Turning Points” captures the inflection points that define local community leaders’ identities and passions, whether life-altering experiences or fleeting moments of realization. Through examining the evolving life stories of community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands, this creative project explores how turning point experiences impact people’s leadership and personal development and profiles these stories in a photo book to effectively share these stories with a broad audience. Supported by a review of contemporary leadership theory, we drew commonalities and trends from these profiled community members regarding their leadership path and style. By highlighting impactful leaders’ life journeys and leadership strengths, “Turning Points” aims to inspire passion and empower strong leadership in others’ lives.

The motivation for this creative project was born from our own uncertainties and frustrations with our life paths. While both academically successful students, neither of us were confident in our next professional or personal steps following graduation. When connecting with professionals during our job recruitment processes, we were energized by hearing others share their personal and professional journeys that led them to their positions. Enthused by these stories, we decided to seek further inspiration from influential leaders in our local Midlands community. We designed “Turning Points: Stories of Passion and Leadership” to showcase the meaningful experiences that inspired leaders toward their current path and to share the valuable leadership lessons learned in this journey. It is our hope that the wide variety of experiences and leadership anecdotes included resonate with and energize others to lead passionate and impactful lives.

## **PURPOSE**

The primary purpose of this project is to explore what turning points, motivations, and life decisions led community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands to their current leadership positions. The project also aims to understand what leadership skills were learned from those impactful experiences and what conclusions can be made about how these leaders found their passion. Ultimately, these profiles will be displayed in a creative physical and digital photobook to make the included life stories and leadership lessons accessible and meaningful to the public.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A combination of programmed biology and life experiences dictate the formation of identity. How we view the world, how we view ourselves, how others view us, and the decisions we make based off those perceptions shape our identities as individuals and as leaders. Identity and leadership development go hand in hand as the ability to lead is a component of one's identity as a whole. Research on identity and leadership development highlights the importance that self-reflection and communication have on ensuring the emotional development required to be an effective leader. For example, McLean and Pratt argue that a key component to identity development is thinking about and reflecting on one's experiences and options in life (2006). Further, Avolio and Gardner find that the "central premise [to authentic leadership development] is that through increased self-awareness, self regulation, and positive modeling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers" (2005). These findings expand upon those of McLean and Pratt, arguing that from this self-reflection and awareness, leaders must then exhibit self regulation and positive modeling to establish authenticity.

To inform the interview process of this creative project, research on existing literature covering life story and identity development was conducted alongside a brief study of predominant leadership theories. A review of this research follows:

## **LIFE STORIES AND IDENTITY**

In a 2013 study, McLean and McAdams examine the internalization and communication of individuals' life stories as the foundation of identity. This process of self-discovery evolves over time and requires reflection and acceptance to confirm a sense of identity and purpose, and it is a process essential to personal well-being and mental health. How an individual internalizes certain life experiences affects the psychological value and meaning attributed to those events. 'Meaning-making' is "the degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event," and it is a process that occurs through self-reflection and conversation. The ability to develop and define one's identity is found to be largely constructed through storytelling, beginning in the maturing stages of adolescence and stretching throughout an adulthood. The ability to effectively converse about one's own experiences is a critical factor in learning from life experiences. Through this life story approach to understanding identity, McLean and McAdams recognized "the power of conversation and social contexts for learning narrative skills, shaping identity expectations, and formulating a meaningful story for one's life" (McLean & McAdams, 2013).

Further, the authors of this paper believe it is important to note that these life experiences and how one reflects upon them is highly affected by cultural context. For example, in a study by McAdams (2008) on self-narratives of American conservatives and liberals, conservatives highlighted events involving authorities or requiring personal responsibility whereas liberals

cited experiences cultivating empathy or broadening their worldviews. These divergent perspectives illustrate how cultural factors play a key role in affecting how people reflect upon and internalize their life experiences. This concept of ‘meaning-making’ is therefore highly contextual and varies between different cultural communities.

The process of ‘meaning-making’ is further examined by McLean and Pratt to better understand how a sense of identity develops. Previous research understood identity development to be defined by the extent to which individuals “explored” their experiences and “committed” to the attached meanings. Yet, McLean and Pratt push this understanding of a static reflection on one’s life events further and define the self as an evolving “story” (2006). The idea of self as a “story” connects back to prior research about the importance of being able to effectively communicate one’s experiences, or “story,” through conversation and sharing with others in order to discover and internalize meaning.

## **TURNING POINTS**

The memories selected for reflection and sharing offer insight into an individual’s self-concept. The process of developing this self-concept is affected by how life altering experiences are later internalized, with this reflection component often being more meaningful than the actual event. These “turning point memories” are critical to individuals’ life trajectories and identity development (McLean & Pratt, 2006). The concept of turning points was first defined in the literature by Clausen as “a major transformation in how people view themselves, their identity, or the significance of their lives.” Turning points can occur from realizations related to internal or external factors, but they always result in affecting one’s social roles, perspectives, goals, or self-concept (Cappeliez, Beaupre, & Robitaille, 2008).

Which life events become these pivotal moments varies significantly between individuals. Research indicates that experiences involving crisis or feelings of vulnerability, especially ones involving relationships with others, often result in more meaning being attached to them. Those who can absorb these disruptive events with an optimistic mindset are found to emotionally grow and learn from these events, a sign of emotional intelligence and maturity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). As expected, interpretations of these transitional periods has a long-term impact on an individual's identity and life trajectory (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). The ability to learn from these experiences can inspire personal growth and lead to intellectual and emotional development. This personal growth and development, however, is dependent on an individual intentionally reflecting and acting upon the lessons learned from these experiences. It is not sufficient for people to simply undergo a disruptive or significant life experience; they must meaningfully self-reflect in some capacity upon how that experience affected them and what they can learn from it.

## **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Developing emotional intelligence through self-reflection is an important component of effectively moving forward from these crucial turning point experiences and strengthening leadership abilities. Emotional intelligence is understood to be “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so that these support thought, to understand emotions and their meaning and to efficiently regulate emotions so as to improve emotional and intellectual evolution” (Petrovici & Dobrescu, 2014). Achieving a level of emotional maturity comes from repeated experience of developing one's emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence has become a key aspect in studying effective leadership. High

levels of emotional intelligence are characterized by an individual's internal awareness and management of emotions in tandem with their ability to identify others' emotions. An ability to empathize with others is a defining characteristic of leadership as it develops an individual's "interpersonal intelligence" which in turn enables collaboration and conflict management (Petrovici & Dobrescu, 2014). In many studies, achieving a level of emotional intelligence in order to effectively relate to others is a critical leadership skill that increases leaders' impact and success.

## **LEADERSHIP THEORY**

Leadership theories approach the concept of effective leadership from a variety of perspectives, but a common thread for successful leadership is an affirmed sense of *identity* and *emotional intelligence* (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer, & Hogg, 2005). Initial leadership research defined leadership through the Trait Theory where an established set of inherent abilities, such as energy, intelligence, persuasive communication, and ambition, were essential for leaders to be successful. This static approach was quickly expanded upon by the Behavior Theory that proposed certain types of various key actions, from heavily mandating orders through an autocratic style of leadership to establishing group buy-in through a democratic process, were the defining characteristics of leadership. Over time, traditional approaches to leadership expanded further under the Contingency Theory, which recognized how changing environmental factors demanded flexibility in leadership styles and abilities in order for situational adaptation to occur (Khan, Khan, & Nawaz, 2016).

Studies of leadership have developed dramatically in the twenty first century with broader and more in-depth views of leadership emerging. Two primary leadership theories that

dominate the literature today revolve around the dichotomy of transactional versus transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is the practice of achieving group goals through a system of rewards and punishments. This rewards-based theory is found predominantly in static environments where systems and processes remain largely the same as the objective is accomplished (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013).

In contrast, transformational leadership can spur systemic change and push objectives forward. Transformational leadership is founded on the idea of a leader inspiring others towards progress to “achieve extraordinary outcomes.” Leaders embodying the transformational model build personal relationships with followers, inspire through role modeling expectations, and empower others to take ownership of their work. The four components of transformational leadership that are often cited include charismatic influence, motivational attitude, intellectual rigor, and mentoring relationships (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Studies on transformational leadership are often criticized for ambiguity in defining effective leadership, but it remains an aspirational model for many leaders. A focus on authenticity has grown out of this relationship-based understanding of leadership. In a study on authentic leadership development, Avolio and Gardner examine authenticity as a root construct “underlying all positive forms of leadership and its development” (2005).

In summary, while leadership theory is still a diverse and evolving field, there has been a general shift away from understanding leadership as a static combination of essential attributes, to a more dynamic, contextual approach where relationship building and emotional intelligence are critical components of effective leadership. This understanding of meaning-making, identity development, and leadership theory informed the interview questions and legitimized the analysis of the interviewees’ self-narratives and leadership trajectories.



## **SCOPE**

Impactful and engaged community leaders in the Midlands were the target subjects for this study. For this project, leadership is broadly defined as anyone who has made a significant contribution to or positive impact on their community. In line with the theme of turning points, leaders demonstrating an exceptional passion, sense of community engagement, or significant shift in career paths were the focus of this project.

Leaders were sought primarily from the social sector in some capacity, including from the governmental, non-profit, educational, arts, and religious community. A diverse group of interviewees with varying experiences, backgrounds, and leadership styles were contacted in order to learn from a range of perspectives and experiences.

The interview subjects were predominantly found through online research, personal knowledge, and from recommendations of university contacts and other interviewees. Those interviewed are a small sample of the impactful and engaged leadership in the South Carolina Midlands area. While the participants represent a diverse array of backgrounds and experiences, the potential candidates were by no means exhausted. The majority of the leaders were in the middle, late, or retirement stages of their careers, but out of the nineteen interviewed, two were young professionals in the early stages of leadership.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The project consisted of interviews with identified community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands area. A series of ten open-ended interview questions (see Appendix 1) was developed based on contemporary leadership and identity development research to guide the

conversations. We tailored specific questions for participants during the course of the interview to gain a more holistic understanding of each leader's background and perspective. The structure of the interview focused initially on the experiences and critical moments that inspired passion or change in the interviewee's life before shifting toward their leadership strengths and values. Interviewees were asked about specific "turning points" in their personal and professional life that led them to their current position. To effectively conduct these interviews, audio was recorded to enable us to be fully attentive to the interviewee and to ensure accurate information was documented. Research indicates that people respond to and elaborate more on their life stories when speaking to attentive and engaged listeners (McLean & McAdams, 2013).

Based on these conversations, we wrote individual profiles to highlight the personal story and lessons learned from each leader. These profiles, along with other research, general conclusions, and graphics were compiled into a photobook. This complementary book is the primary product of this thesis endeavor, showcasing the profiles of the local leaders and providing conclusions and commonalities among the profiled leaders. A complete list of all those interviewed can be found in Appendix B.

## **CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS**

Challenges we faced during this project were getting interview candidates to respond to meeting requests, scheduling interview times, and technological challenges regarding creation of the photobook. Limitations of this project include knowing that all information from the interviewer was self reported, inherently lending itself to personal biases. There was no verification method to fact check the interviewees' stories. However, we do not find this invalidates or undermines the merit of the project as it is not intended to be a controlled scientific

study. The project's primary goal is to explore what turning points, motivations, and life decisions led community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands to their current leadership positions.

## **FINDINGS**

The overall findings of “Turning Points: Stories of Passion and Leadership in the South Carolina Midlands” are detailed below.

### **THREE TRENDS OF TURNING POINTS**

While each leader shared unique life stories, several common trends and themes emerged in their life journeys, driving passions, and leadership values. These commonalities offer an interesting perspective on these leaders' experiences collectively and reinforce important takeaways for aspiring leaders. Specific stories are highlighted below but a complete list of individual leader's experiences is available in Appendix C.

In understanding the experiences that led to leaders' career paths and passions, three predominant patterns of turning points appeared within their stories: 1) a *significant experience* was identified that greatly modified perspectives or goals, 2) an *existing interest or passion* was enriched or directed by external experiences, and 3) *others encouraged or empowered them* to take action along a particular path. Out of the nineteen interviews conducted, eight of the participants' experiences aligned with the first pattern of a significant experience affecting their path. The rest of the subjects had experiences generally distributed between the latter trends.

Eight participants identified specific experiences that challenged their worldview and ignited a developing passion or purpose. The events that inspired these turning points varied

greatly between the participants, but they were all driven by external factors that resulted in an internal shift and realization. For example, Dr. Kirk Randazzo, a University of South Carolina professor with a focus on leadership studies, was inspired by his father's ability to emotionally connect with others through his leadership on a school board. Ann Timberlake, former director of the Conservation Voters of South Carolina, opened up a Sierra Club photo book and learned for the first time about the importance of protecting South Carolina's natural resources. Della Watkins, director of the Columbia Museum of Art, participated in a program at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art which inspired her to pursue a career in the field. While these pivotal events were important in isolation, it was apparent through the participants' comfort in telling their story and the amount of detail included, that they had previously reflected on and shared these experiences before. This aligns with research on turning point memories that highlights the importance of self reflection and narrative conversation to provide meaning to life events (McLean & Pratt, 2006). If no meaning was attached to these events, the participants would not have had the personal growth or perspective shift that consequently resulted. In several interviews, the participants specifically referenced the importance of reflection on these experiences, stating that it was only in hindsight that they could identify and act on this turning point moment.

For others, it was not a single identifiable moment that changed their life path but rather an existing interest that was directed by internal awareness and external opportunities. For example, Mayor Elise Partin grew up with a driving passion for helping others and an awareness of the public sector through her mother's state government work. Her passion for social impact drove Partin to get involved in her community when a public land dispute issue arose. The personal connections and positive change she made inspired her to run for Mayor. Similarly,

Rev. Helen Harrison Coker, a Presbyterian pastor, felt called to the ministry since her youth, a passion that kept her actively involved in Christian communities, but it took a series of external experiences and internal reflections in order to confirm and follow through on this path. These experiences, while more ambiguous for the individual, still align with the concepts of meaning-making and narrative construction as essential steps in the evolving story of identity development (McLean & Pratt, 2006). These participants recognized an innate drive that pushed them forward in their life story. Through a combination of reflection and seeking relevant opportunities, the participants molded their identity and story to live out this sense of purpose.

The third pattern evident in several participants' life stories was the impact of others' encouragement that empowered them to find their path or passion. While she grew up with a love for reading, Leslie Tetreault, director of the Children's Room at the Richland County Public Library, only found her path to and passion for libraries after her mother convinced her to go to library school. Dr. Patrick Hickey, a professor in the University of South Carolina's nursing program, was inspired to act on an innate sense of caring for others after a school guidance counselor advised him to enter the field of nursing. These experiences illustrate the power of relationships and personal interactions in affecting life outcomes and direction. Finding meaning from the influence of others corresponds with research findings on the power of "social contexts for learning narrative skills, shaping identity expectations, and formulating a meaningful story for one's life" (McLean & McAdams, 2013). With this concept in mind, it is clear that these individuals were fortunate to have positive social influences and encouragement.

While different patterns were evident among the turning point life experiences shared by participants, the self-reflective and meaning-making components, as supported in research on life stories, were critical aspects for the participants' life journeys. As most of the interviewees were

middle-aged or in the retirement stage of their careers, these reflective components were clearly evident. It was a necessary process for them to construct a secure identity as a leader based on their life story. Two of the participants were young professionals in the early stages of their careers. There was a clear distinction in their ability to identify significant pivotal or meaningful moments of their life journeys that inspired their work thus far. While it is impossible to draw generalizations from these two participants, it is likely that they are still in the early evolution of reflection and meaning making as they construct their identities as leaders and individuals.

## **TWO THEMES OF PASSION**

The life changing experiences discussed above affected participants' sense of passion and purpose. The discussion of passion emerged in two distinct ways amongst those interviewed. Passion was discussed either 1) as *specific objectives* directly related to a person's work or 2) as *general motivations* that were pursued through professional or personal avenues.

Eight respondents expressed a passion directly linked to their professional careers or life work. For example, Dr. Lemuel Watson, former Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Carolina, referenced engaging with students as his motivating drive, a passion pursued through his extensive work in higher education. Similarly, Leslie Tetreault, Children's Room director at the Richland County Public Library, spoke of her passion in terms of children's literacy efforts.

In contrast to the close links between these motivations and career path, other leaders addressed their passions as actions that were fulfilled through their work. Lauren Wilkie, a director at Transitions community shelter, directly acknowledged her passion for "fixing things"

to better her community. This energy drove her to revitalize programming at Transitions and will lead her to improve other social programs in the future. While Wilkie is concerned over the issue of homelessness in the Midlands, it is the energy she gets from improving organizations and systems that inspires her desire to serve homeless and other vulnerable communities. Likewise, Erin Hall, CEO of Palmetto Association for Families and Children, derives her sense of purpose from empowering others, whether it is inspiring a board of directors, enabling a new volunteer committee, or supporting vulnerable children. Hall finds opportunities to fulfill this passion through collaboration with others through her work advocating for families and children in South Carolina.

These two types of passions, further detailed in Appendix C, illustrate the variety of forces that can drive and inspire leaders. These leaders' experiences highlight the importance of recognizing and pursuing that which motivates and inspires purpose, regardless of what the specific passion is, in order to live a meaningful and fulfilled life.

## **PRIMARY LEADERSHIP LESSONS AND OBSERVATIONS**

Several common leadership lessons and personal strengths recurred throughout the interviews, either expressed directly by the participants or observed holistically during the process. The ability to reflect, take initiative, challenge oneself, build relationships, and empathize were predominant leadership strengths frequently addressed.

The majority of leaders referenced the importance of self-reflection and introspection to recognize and learn from impactful turning point experiences. This process was affirmed in literature as an essential factor in effectively constructing an identity, understanding the past, and anticipating the future. Effective leadership appears to be closely linked to having a secure if

evolving self-concept and awareness of life experiences. For example, Della Watkins from the Columbia Museum of Art emphasized at multiple points that it is critical to fundamentally understand and question what one as an individual or organization is doing and *why* one is doing it. She argues that one must comprehensively understand the most basic purpose of what one is doing and devise a strategy around that purpose to be an effective leader.

Several participants also cited the importance of self-compassion, accepting personal strengths and limitations, learning from mistakes, and taking time for self-care. Watson, former Dean of the College of Education, viewed meditation and introspection as key to success and happiness, saying everyone must “be attentive to what the inner voice is saying to you -- just own that and go with it.” This self-nurturing empowers the participants to be effective and balanced leaders, contributing to community efforts while also caring for their own mental and physical health.

Demonstrating initiative to create and take advantage of opportunities was an important lesson shared by several participants. While self-care and accepting one’s limits are important skills, constantly embracing new personal or professional opportunities is also an essential part of growth as a leader. Columbia Councilwoman Tameika Devine chose to run against an incumbent for the Council seat instead of waiting for an unopposed seat to open. Hilary Brannon, Events and Communications director at the University of South Carolina, embraced an opportunity to lead the Columbia Leadership Initiative to strengthen her leadership skills and local impact.

Expanding upon this concept, several leaders pushed the need for personal challenge. Professional and personal growth is greatest when operating out of one’s comfort zone. Several participants demonstrated how accepting challenge was critical to their leadership success. Dr.



Hickey, the Capstone Faculty Principal, views pursuing personal challenge as the foundation of his life trajectory. From giving him the courage to seek a career as a male nurse to enabling his success in climbing the seven highest summits, Hickey firmly believes in the value of seeking personal challenge to spur growth. He even established ‘personal challenge’ as a core tenet of the Capstone Scholars program to encourage student growth.

The relational nature of leadership was also a central component, aligning with the social aspect of leadership explored in transformational leadership theories. Building personal relationships and maintaining transparent communication was frequently expressed as essential components to form and support effective teams. Mayor Partin works to remain open and accountable to others, building trust in her leadership to successfully effect change.

Empowering others was also cited as the core definition of leadership by many participants. This transformational objective can be accomplished through supporting equitable, respectful, and communicative environments and opportunities for others. For example, Robin Waites, director of Historic Columbia, is committed to expanding the narrative of the city of Columbia to be a more comprehensive and diverse one. Through her work at Historic Columbia, she and her team have focused upon emphasizing the stories and contributions of traditionally underrepresented, African American communities in the city by transcribing, publishing, and empowering the stories of elders in the community.

The role of mentorship was also referenced by several leaders in being able to connect with and empower others. Several participants spoke highly of mentors that taught them professional lessons, such as Erin Hall’s mentor in March of Dimes who demonstrated success as a woman in the nonprofit world. Interviewees also told stories of personal lessons they learned, such as how Councilwoman Tameika Devine’s mother instilled a sense of self-confidence and

ability in Devine since her youth. Other leaders referenced the importance of being a mentor for others, which leads to mutual benefits for both in the relationship. Councilwoman Devine also introduced the idea of sponsoring, as opposed to mentoring, others to not only share life experiences but to intentionally empower others to lead by facilitating connections and opening doors to new opportunities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our motivations to conduct this leadership project came from our frustrations and concerns about our own personal and professional paths. Through researching leadership theory and interviewing nineteen individuals who exhibit leadership and display significant community contributions, we have showcased instances of leadership across many professions. The primary purpose of this project is to explore what turning points, motivations, and life decisions led community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands to their current leadership position in the hopes that these stories will inspire others. After interviewing all project participants and conducting a literature review of leadership and identity theory, we have made several conclusions via a qualitative comparison of interviewee responses.

First, regarding turning points that inspired a sense of purpose and passion in interviewees' lives, participants fell into three major categories: 1) a *significant experience* greatly modified perspectives or goals, 2) an *existing interest or passion* was affected by external experiences, and 3) *others encouraged or empowered them* to take action. Second, when discussing their life's passion, participants described their passion either 1) as *specific objectives* related to their work or 2) as *general concepts* that they pursued through various avenues. Finally, when looking at the characteristics and behaviors interviewees described that make up a

good leader, the concepts of *self-reflection*, *emotional intelligence*, and *challenging* oneself became apparent commonalities.

Through the research and interviews conducted, we have both found the project personally enriching and inspiring. As we prepare to embark on our professional journeys, we will take the interviewees' words with us. We strive to actively seek or create opportunities that constantly challenge us, that enable us to impact our communities, and that allow us to learn from others' diverse perspectives while also staying true to our own values. The importance of active reflection and self-compassion was reinforced in both the literature and interviews conducted. As a major takeaway from this project, we intend to be more intentional about reflecting on our experiences and goals to further enable leadership growth and personal identity development.

By shaping and affirming our own identities, building our self-confidence, and recognizing our strengths and weaknesses, we can grow into impactful professional and community leaders. It is our hope that through archiving and creating a photobook of these Midlands leaders, others will also be inspired by these leaders' actions and words.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

After providing an overview of the thesis project and purpose, these are the questions that guided the conversations:

#### **Background**

1. Can you please give me an overview of your professional career that has led you to your current position?
2. Did you always know this was the path you wanted to take / position to hold?

#### **Turning Points**

1. Would you say you have found a passion or purpose for your life / life direction?
  - a. When did you realize this? Was it always something you knew or was there a shifting/turning point/life changing moment along the way?
2. Was there a moment, experience, or period of life that changed your direction -- your passion, career choice, gave you more 'purpose'?
  - a. What triggered this experience?
  - b. Were there certain mentors along the way? Did you have an "ah ha" moment?

#### **Leadership**

1. How do you think you have developed as a leader?
2. What would you say is your primary career / personal goal?

#### **Future**

1. Where do you see yourself in the next 5 - 10 years?
2. What would you like people to remember you by / what legacy would you like to leave?

#### **Conclusion**

1. Lessons Learned?
2. What advice would you give to young professionals or recent undergraduates as they embark on their next steps?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Individuals Interviewed**

- **Ann Timberlake**, former Executive Director of Conservation Voters of South Carolina
- **Elise Partin**, Mayor of Cayce, South Carolina
- **Robin Waites**, Director, Historic Columbia
- **Dr. Kirk Randazzo**, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of South Carolina
- **Leslie Tetreault**, Children's Room Director, Richland County Public Library
- **Joel Collins Jr.**, Attorney, Collins & Lacy
- **Eme Crawford**, Communications Director, Women's Rights Empowerment Network
- **Dr. Patrick Hickey**, Capstone Scholars Faculty Principal and Clinical Associate Professor of Nursing, University of South Carolina
- **Della Watkins**, Director, Columbia Museum of Art
- **Rev. Helen Harrison Coker**, Associate Pastor, Saxe Gotha Presbyterian Church
- **Dr. Lemuel Watson**, Professor of Educational Leadership and Policies and former Dean of the College of Education, University of South Carolina
- **Hilary Brannon**, Communications and Events Director, University of South Carolina
- **Patty Cavanaugh**, Executive Director, American Board of Trial Advocates - South Carolina Chapter
- **Dr. Jean Weingarth**, Koger Center Director and U101 Instructor, University of South Carolina
- **Lauren Wilkie**, Director of Programs, Transitions
- **Dr. Rajeev Bias**, Infectious Diseases Physician and Director, Carolina Survivor Clinic
- **Tameika Devine**, Columbia City Councilwoman and Attorney, Jabber & Isaac, PA
- **Heather Cooper**, Public Relations Director, Soda City
- **Erin Hall**, Chief Executive Officer, Palmetto Association for Children and Families

## **APPENDIX C**

**Individual Profiles:  
Turning Points, Defined Passions, Primary Leadership Lessons**

Turning Points:

Three predominant patterns of turning points appeared within the leaders' life stories:

- 1) A significant experience was identified that greatly modified perspectives or goals
- 2) An existing interest or passion was enriched or directed by external experiences
- 3) Others encouraged or empowered them to take action along a particular path

Passions:

The discussion of passion emerged in two distinct ways amongst those interviewed:

- 1) As **specific** objectives often directly related to an individual's work
- 2) As **general** concepts or actions pursued through personal or professional avenues

Table 1:

| Participant                                      | Turning Point Pattern | Experience Description   | Passion Pattern | Self-reported Passion / Purpose   |
|--|-----------------------|--|-----------------|---|
| Ann Timberlake<br>(Conservation Voters of SC)    | 1) Significant Event  | Eyes opened to conservation needs after reading Sierra Club photobook on South Carolina  | Specific        | Conservation efforts  |
| Elise Partin<br>(Mayor of Cayce)                 | 2) Existing interest  | Interest in helping people and awareness of public sector work from mother; inspired to run for Mayor after public land dispute in community   | General         | Empowering others; community engagement   |
| Robin Waites,<br>(Director of Historic Columbia) | 2) Existing Interest  | Grandfather instilled in her a passion for the arts and mother a member of county council which caused her to become passionate about community activism which has translated into giving a voice to underrepresented communities. | General         | Community activism/engagement<br>Historic preservation and holistic understanding |



|  |                      |  |          |   |
|--|----------------------|--|----------|---|
| Hilary Brannon (USC Comm & Events Director)        | 2) Existing Interest | Experience in campus leadership and service; inspired her toward community engagement and leadership             | General  | Community engagement; leadership initiatives                            |
| Kirk Randazzo, (USC Political Science Prof.)       | 1) Significant Event | Observed father's leadership at a school board meeting & attended leadership conference through music fraternity | Specific | Leadership studies  |
| Leslie Tetreault (Richland Library)                | 3) Encouragement     | Mother encouraged her to attend library school; classmate encouraged her to apply to Children's Room position    | Specific | Literature; children's literacy   |
| Joel Collins, Jr. (Attorney & Professor)           | 3) Encouragement     | Family member encouraged him to consider law school  | Specific | Educating on law, Constitution, and history of Southern United States   |
| Eme Crawford (WREN)                                | 1) Significant Event | Involvement in social justice organizations and conversations in college   | General  | Empowering others; breaking down barriers                               |
| Dr. Patrick Hickey (USC Nursing Prof.)             | 3) Encouragement     | Guidance counselor recommended pursuing nursing career   | Specific | Healthcare; empowering others to get involved in healthcare initiatives |
| Della Watkins (Director of Columbia Museum of Art) | 1) Significant Event | High school participation in Virginia Museum of Fine Art   | Specific | Fine Arts, Leadership, Organizations Transformation and Improvement     |
| Rev. Helen Harrison Coker (Pastor)                 | 2) Existing Interest | Felt called to faith for a long time but took several experiences in other fields before finding path            | General  | Christianity; empowering faith communities                              |
| Dr. Lemuel Watson (USC Education Professor)        | 3) Encouragement     | Classmates encouraged him to step into band leadership position; inspired him to lead student body               | Specific | Engaging with and supporting students                                   |
| Lauren Wilkie (Transitions)                        | 1) Significant Event | Worked at Nurturing Center for abused and neglected children and first exposed to reality of poverty             | General  | Revitalizing organizations, programming, and other system structures    |
| Dr. Rajeev Bias (CSC Refugee Center)               | 3) Encouragement     | Classmates & friends encouraged him to look into field of medicine as a way to serve and help others             | General  | Serving vulnerable communities  |

|                                   |                      |  |          |  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--|----------|--|
| Tameika Devine (Council-woman)    | 2) Existing Interest | Proposal for a domestic violence court turned down by City Council; inspired her to run to enact change  | General  | Impacting community development and change                     |
| Erin Hall (CEO PAFCAF)            | 1) Significant Event | Joined March of Dimes youth leadership initiative in high school and first exposed to nonprofit / volunteer work   | General  | Revitalizing organizations and systems; empowering communities |
| Patty Cavanaugh (ABOTA Director)  | 3) Encouragement     | High school teacher encouraged her to apply for opportunities at the FBI   | General  | Serving others; protecting citizen rights                      |
| Dr. Jean Weingarth (Koger Center) | 1) Existing Interest | Commitment to helping and supporting college students succeed after graduation   | General  | Student engagement/mentorship, Christianity                    |
| Heather Cooper (Soda City)        | 1) Existing Interest | Young professional passionate about marketing and community involvement. Realized she did not like the NY lifestyle and moved back to Columbia to have more local, community involvement | Specific | Digital marketing, social media, community engagement          |

A wide river flows towards a bridge in the distance. The water is a mix of blue and brown, with white foam from rapids in the foreground. The bridge has several concrete pillars. The far bank is covered in dense green trees under a clear blue sky. A rainbow is visible on the left side of the river.

# TURNING POINTS

STORIES OF PASSION AND LEADERSHIP  
IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA MIDLANDS

LOUISE WHITE & PHILIP RICHARDSON





# TURNING POINTS

STORIES OF PASSION AND LEADERSHIP  
IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA MIDLANDS

LOUISE WHITE & PHILIP RICHARDSON



University of South Carolina Honors College  
Senior Thesis Project

Thank you to those who supported us in the creative design of this project.

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We are inspired by your leadership and passions, and we will forever cherish  
the opportunity to learn from your life stories and experiences.

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## FOREWORD

“Turning Points” captures the inflection points that define local community leaders’ identities and passions, whether life-altering experiences or fleeting moments of realization. This book intends to highlight the diversity of leadership present throughout the South Carolina Midlands, explore the unique experiences of community leaders that led them to their personal or professional passion, and draw conclusions and commonalities from these leaders on their leadership traits and values. Chronicling these personal life stories and leadership lessons can share wisdom and inspire passion in others’ lives.

For the purposes of this project, leaders are broadly defined as those who have made a significant contribution to their community or demonstrated a positive impact and influence in the lives of the people they have affected. Leaders from across the South Carolina Midlands in occupations from government to education to arts from government to education to private enterprise are profiled in this book.

Each interview was a unique conversation tailored to the interviewee’s personal and professional life and growth. These are some of the questions that guided the conversations:

- In your own words, can you give me an overview of your background that has led you to your current position or passion?
- Did your sense of purpose evolve slowly over time, or was there a specific turning point experience, or set of experiences, along the way?
- Are there any specific values or principles of good leadership that you work to embody or share with others?





# DEFINING LEADERSHIP

A combination of programmed biology and life experiences dictate the formation of identity. How we view the world, how we view ourselves, how others view us, and the decisions we make based off those perceptions shape our identity as an individual and as a leader.

Identity and leadership development go hand in hand as one's ability to lead is a component of their identity as a whole. Research on identity and leadership development highlights the importance of self-reflection and communication to contribute to the emotional development required to be an effective leader. While leadership theory is a diverse and evolving field, there has been a general shift away from understanding leadership as a static combination of essential attributes to a more dynamic, contextual approach where relationship building and emotional intelligence are critical components of effective leadership.

As evident through research, the principles of leadership are defined and exemplified in unique ways. To portray these diverse interpretations, the community leaders profiled were asked to share their own definitions of leadership.





# Leadership is...

*"Inspiring others to action and moving a group of people in a common direction."* - Erin Hall

*"Having the courage to follow the purpose where you most are driven."* - Dr. Lemuel Watson

*"Just serving. Serving others, forgetting about yourself, and knowing it's about making a difference in the community."*  
- Mayor Elise Partin

*"Helping pull others up around you to make whatever it is you're doing the best that it can be. Your job as a leader is to coach and motivate others to do their very best and give them the tools they need to do that."* - Hilary Brannon

*"Someone that you want to follow and someone who's not afraid of hard work. They have to know the heartbeat of the organization, be aware of everyone's work, and strive to set others up to do well."* - Leslie Tetreault

*"The ability to inspire real change in a meaningful way."* - Tameika Devine

*"Just about how we interact with other folks. Everybody leads and everybody follows."* - Dr. Kirk Randazzo

*"Having, not just the ability, but the willingness to be open to opportunities."* - Della Watkins

*"Within you. Others can help you and can guide you, but ultimately within each person is his or her own leader."*  
- Dr. Rajeev Bais

*"A journey. Leaders are on their own journeys, but they invite others to journey with them in order to improve everyone and their situations. On that journey, you've got to be willing to take risks, be aware, be relevant, and be grounded."*  
- Rev. Helen Harrison Coker

*"Setting other people up to become leaders."* - Dr. Patrick Hickey

*"Team building. You can't be a leader without a team. You've really got to value your team and listen to people. Leaders are being more courageous about speaking out, but you've got to know you have a team behind you."* - Ann Timberlake

## LEADER PROFILES

- Ann Timberlake, former Executive Director of Conservation Voters of South Carolina
- Elise Partin, Mayor of Cayce
- Robin Waites, Director, Historic Columbia
- Dr. Kirk Randazzo, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of South Carolina
- Della Watkins, Director, Columbia Museum of Art
- Leslie Tetreault, Children's Room Director, Richland Country Public Library
- Joel Collins Jr., Attorney, Collins & Lacy
- Eme Crawford, Communications Director, Women's Rights Empowerment Network
- Heather Cooper, Public Relations Director, Soda City
- Dr. Rajeev Bias, Director, Carolina Survivor Clinic
- Rev. Helen Harrison Coker, Associate Pastor, Saxe Gotha Presbyterian Church
- Dr. Patrick Hickey, Capstone Faculty Principal, University of South Carolina
- Dr. Lemuel Watson, Professor of Educational Leadership and Policies, University of South Carolina
- Hilary Brannon, Communications and Events Director, University of South Carolina
- Patty Cavanaugh, Executive Director, American Board of Trial Advocates - SC Chapter
- Lauren Wilkie, Director of Programs, Transitions
- Tameika Devine, Columbia City Council
- Erin Hall, Chief Executive Officer, Palmetto Association for Children and Families
- Dr. Jean Weingarh, Koger Center Director and U101 Instructor, University of South Carolina
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# ANN TIMBERLAKE

Conservation Voters of South Carolina  
Former Executive Director

## Turning Point

Ann Timberlake grew up in South Carolina during a time when the outdoors was widely taken for granted. In her senior year at Tulane University, Timberlake discovered a Sierra Club exhibition book that combined beautiful nature pictures and inspirational quotes with information about the battles to save these places. Reading this book opened Timberlake's eyes to the beauty of and threat to natural resources in her home state. Following this experience, Timberlake joined the new Sierra Club in the Carolinas to connect with environmental advocacy efforts.

## Environmental Leadership

In the late 1970s, Timberlake fought with her Sierra Club team to make the Congaree park a protected National Park, a successful and “transformational campaign [that illustrated to Timberlake] the power of people and grassroots work.” While Timberlake pursued other opportunities -- including working as a salesperson for Pillsbury and opening a locally sourced grocery store in downtown Columbia -- she maintained an active role in volunteering for political and conservation campaigns. Observing a gap in conservation efforts, a board came together to establish the Conservation Voters of South Carolina, appointing Timberlake as the founding Executive Director. Timberlake attributes her passion for environmental advocacy, experience with nonprofit and political volunteer work, and natural inclination to step up to lead during times of need as her only qualifications for the position. She quickly flourished in the role, squashing any doubts about her leadership. By the time of her retirement in 2016, Timberlake had grown CVSC to be the uniting conservation voice in the State House and in communities across South Carolina, with an annual budget of \$600,000 and several full-time employees.



## Leadership Lessons

*"Fill the gap."* Timberlake has used her natural willingness and energy to step up in order to fill gaps, whether in stepping up to lead the Conservation Voters or in advocating against nuclear waste when no other organization were doing so. Recognizing early on that conservation groups with different priorities needed "a common agenda and a way to speak with a more united voice," Timberlake built Conservation Voters to be that uniting force, while always "respecting the missions of the respective organizations and their own need to have their own identity." Timberlake exemplifies the need for leaders to recognize and step up to fill existing gaps in order to build a united and impactful voice.

*"Build relationships with those around you and treat everyone fairly."* In her early days leading Conservation Voters, Timberlake learned the importance of building relationships by listening and talking to community leaders and legislators. While not a lobbyist, she regularly visited legislators to listen to their concerns and priorities in order to build effective and positive relationships. She found she liked the "combination of being able to go in and combine [her] passion for environmental protection with the pragmatic factor of building relationships with politicians." Timberlake strove to find common ground with all legislators equally, regardless of party, through meaningful conversations where she both listened to and educated legislators on conservation efforts.

**"It is our own life story that motivates us in a lot of ways... My heartstring has always been protecting land."**







# ELISE PARTIN

Mayor of Cayce

## Turning Point

Elise Partin remembers learning from a young age “that parks and sidewalks didn’t just happen. Someone had a vision who was behind all of that.” Partin would eventually be that person with a vision. She values a variety of external experiences and internal values that directed her life trajectory towards public service. From a young age, Partin was exposed to public service roles through her mother’s work under Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley. As a freshman at the University of South Carolina, Partin wanted to go into international diplomacy but quickly found that the field lacked the human element that inspired and energized her. Turning to the field of public health, Partin discovered she could focus on people and improve health opportunities and outcomes. This passion for making things better for people directly connects to her work as Mayor today as she works to understand “where [her] community is” to ultimately take them to “where they want to be.”

## Mayoral Leadership

After leading advocacy efforts in a public land dispute issue in Cayce, Partin gained community recognition for her leadership and social values. With strong local support, she decided to run for Mayor -- a challenging campaign that was also the “best time of [her] life.” Now in her third term as mayor, Partin has loved the opportunity to lead and serve Cayce as the first female Mayor.

Throughout her mayorship, Partin has striven to connect with her community to establish a direction for her work. Upon entering the role, she established a community vision board to understand opportunities for improvements throughout Cayce. As a self-titled “ethics nerd,” Partin firmly values honesty and integrity in public leadership. She appreciates the immense trust her community places in her, and she works hard to accomplish shared economic and social visions. Municipal government is an important avenue to accomplish tangible and ethical change at the local level, and Partin encourages all to become involved in elected office.





**"I love the story of the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland: Alice asks, 'where do I go?' and the Cheshire Cat responds, 'where do you want to go?' She says, 'I don't know or care,' and he says, 'then it doesn't matter which way you go.' You have to know what it is you want. You have to know where you are going."**

### Leadership Lessons

*"Create an even playing field."* Partin strives to give everyone in case an equal opportunity to be heard and to be treated fairly. Listening is an integral part of leadership, and leaders must strive to listen openly and equally to everyone in the community. Applying her experience in public health, Partin works to "get community buy in and ask the right questions to see what the community needs," but she recognizes the need to openly listen to the answers to make an equitable and effective change.

*"Trusted leaders get more done."* Trust is the foundation for ethical and effective leadership, and Partin strives to build trust with her community through promoting ethical processes and building relationships. As Mayor, Partin has directly observed and experienced that once a sense of trust and accountability is developed, elected officials are able to better serve their communities.





# ROBIN WAITES

Director  
Historic Columbia

## Turning Point

Robin Waites' commitment to civic engagement, community outreach, and the arts has been a passion of hers from a young age. Influenced by her grandfather, an artist who immigrated to the U.S. from Armenia and became the first Dean of the University of South Carolina Art Department, and by her mother, who served as a member of Richland County Council, Waites has spent the majority of her professional life serving the Columbia and Midlands community through advocating for preservation, telling a more inclusive history of the city, and empowering those around her. Having received a Masters of Art History from U.S.C. she went to work for the South Carolina State Museum. While she enjoyed some of the work she was doing, she did not feel as though she was serving her community in the way that she would like. It was when she served as the lead for a children's art program that her passion was reinforced for directly working with Columbia community members, leading her to her current role at Historic Columbia.

## A Community Leader

Through her work as director of Historic Columbia, Waites is committed to expanding the narrative of the city of Columbia to be more comprehensive and diverse. She and her team have focused upon emphasizing the stories and contributions of traditionally underrepresented, African American communities in the city by transcribing, highlighting, and empowering the stories of elders in the community. Every day through educational initiatives, coalition building, and elevating much of Colombia's overlooked history, she acts as a leader not only within her organization but within the context of the greater Columbia community as well. In her role at the helm of Historic

**"Build relationship(s) in whatever job you're in, showing that you're eager and willing to do whatever it takes to get a job done."**



Columbia, she has managed to shift and expand the organization's mission to not only focus on the physical preservation of historic buildings and spaces, but to provide a wider range of educational and community engagement initiatives. Waites places great importance on ensuring that the stories of all communities in Columbia are told, which creates an inclusive and diverse narrative of the city.

### Leadership Lessons

*"It's important to have a certain level of ... compassion."* Through the collaborative nature of her work at Historic Columbia, Robin has learned the importance of being able, "to not place yourself above anybody you are working with" in order to achieve open communication and build genuine relationships.

*"Be a good steward of public resources."* As a community servant in the non-profit field, Robin understands that it is critical for leaders to be responsible for the public's places, stories, and financial resources. Ethical leadership is essential to ensure people's stories are shared appropriately and honestly. Robin believes that "inclusivity is really key," and she strives to embody this value throughout her work at Historic Columbia.







# DR. KIRK RANDAZZO

Associate Professor of Political Science,  
University of South Carolina

## Turning Point

Kirk Randazzo's passion for leadership studies began at a young age. At a school board meeting in high school, Randazzo remembers watching his father, the president of the teacher union, place an apple in front of the board and state "teachers cannot live on apples alone." This powerful moment wrapped up his father's presentation advocating for higher teacher salaries, and it was a moment profoundly impactful on Randazzo. It "crystallized the importance of leadership, of being able to deliver a message, and of creating emotional connections," and Randazzo developed a strong interest in effective leadership from this experience. This interest transformed into a passion after Randazzo was exposed to formal leadership study and training at a leadership development conference with his college music fraternity. Since these pivotal experiences, studying and teaching about leadership has been a consistent passion that has weaved intentionally and subconsciously throughout Randazzo's professional and personal work.

## A Passion for Leadership

For Randazzo, leadership is a lifelong journey affecting everyone through deep relationships and brief interactions. Within this understanding of leadership, Randazzo strives to convey his sense of passion, loyalty, and equity in every interaction to empower and inspire others. Randazzo heads a variety of leadership initiatives in his music fraternity, in the Columbia community, and at the University of South Carolina by establishing the Carolina Leadership Initiative which created a leadership minor and graduation distinction.





*"At the time I didn't recognize the impact my father had on me. Now I can trace back to who I am as a person through what he taught me."*

## Leadership Lessons

*"You must stay true to who you are."* Each person's leadership style is unique and cannot be developed through external study alone. Rather, "leadership needs to take an internal perspective" to identify and embrace one's own values, beliefs, and strengths. Randazzo emphasizes the need for self-authenticity in order to effectively "work within our own strengths, weakness, and opportunities to be really successfully as a leader."

*"Don't lose sight of your passion."* Randazzo encourages everyone to follow through on their convictions to give purpose and direction to their own lives and leadership. Acknowledging that "it can become way too easy to get complacent or apathetic," Randazzo emphasizes the need to find or create opportunities that allow one's passion to come alive and to stay resilient in the face of failure.



# DELLA WATKINS

Director  
Columbia Museum of Art

## Turning Point

Along with her passion for the arts, Della Watkins is truly committed to improving the organization and community of which she is a part. While relatively new to the position of Director of the Columbia Museum of Art, Watkins's love of the arts was realized years ago. In high school, Watkins attended a weekend program at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, an experience that inspired her passion for the arts in a significant way. After graduating from college, Watkins accepted a position teaching art in public schools for over ten years. She realized, however, that while she enjoyed arts education, her real passion was in management and leadership in the arts world. In taking leadership training courses at universities around the country, reading leadership books, and building years of experience, Watkins has demonstrated a real passion for impacting a community through arts engagement.

## Understanding Leadership

Watkins emphasizes how critical it is to fundamentally understand and question what you as an individual or organization are doing and why you are doing it. She argues that one must comprehensively understand the most basic purpose of what you are doing and devise a strategy around that purpose to be an effective leader. Once you understand this purpose, Watkins says one has to be flexible, not afraid of action, and "go for no" -- meaning until you hear "no," you should not stop asking for more or what more you can do.



**"Step out and start. Learn from what you're not passionate about, [but] step out and try something, gauge where you are and then correct. Keep experiencing [and] correcting, and you will gravitate to your passion."**





## Leadership Lessons

*“Don’t follow your passion, find it.”* Watkins discovered her love for the arts community early in her life, but she continued to actively look for opportunities to expand this passion in new ways. This ultimately led her to work in arts administration rather than education, an experience that expands her passion for the arts and challenges her to grow as a leader. Watkins strives to be an aware leader, constantly challenging herself, seeking opportunities where she “can truly make a difference,” and always pursuing her passion.

*“My full-time job is about relationship building.”* Relationships are the foundation for effective leadership, and Watkins strives to cultivate these relationships through strong communication. For Watkins, “a leader must know how to put hope, trust, knowledge, and fun” into teams, creating a collaborative and open environment. She aims to combine her driving passion with strong communication in order to inspire and empower others.





# LESLIE TETREAULT

Director of Children's Programs,  
Richland County Public Library

**"A library is about ideas and  
about opening up a world not  
making it smaller."**

## Turning Point

As an undergraduate, Leslie Tetreault did not know what she wanted to do. When her mother advised her to attend library school, Tetreault "thought it sounded like an awful idea," but without another path in mind, Tetreault enrolled in library school. Tetreault settled as a librarian in the upstate, a job that sufficed to pay the bills but was an unsupportive work environment. Accepting that work was merely meant to make a living, Tetreault did not initially see the need for a change. After encouragement from others, Tetreault applied for a position to lead the Richland Library Children's Room, an opportunity that gave Tetreault a fresh love for her work. Surrounded by supportive colleagues, Tetreault felt accepted for who she was and energized by her work supporting youth literacy initiatives. Thirty years later, Tetreault still leads the Children's Room, managing a staff to deliver excellent customer service and promote children's literacy throughout the Midlands.

## Leadership Lessons

*"Transparency is very important."* Within her team in the Children's Room, Tetreault sets an expectation for transparent and honest communication. This not only enables team building and buy in but also empowers team members to "have all the tools to make the right decisions" and work independently.

## A Love for Libraries

For Tetreault, there is "nothing like seeing a child walk out [of the Children's Room] with a stack of books," and it is this opportunity to connect with children through literature that has kept her coming back to work every day. Books teach about humanity by building empathy and stretching people's understanding. Tetreault strives to bring this aspect of humanity to children by building an environment within the Children's Room that is accessible, welcoming, and attentive to the community.

Tetreault likewise builds a strong team of librarians to fulfill this mission by creating an open and collaborative environment while holding people accountable and pushing them to embrace new challenges. For Tetreault, "it is rewarding knowing that [she is] making a path for people," and her leadership within the Children's Room continues to have a positive impact on the Midlands community.



# JOEL COLLINS, JR.

Attorney, Collins & Lacy LLC  
Professor, South Carolina Honors College

## Turning Point

Joel Collins grew up instilled with the determination to work hard. As a student at Riverside Military Academy, Collins was inspired by the respected football Coach's common saying that "you can't lift a third-class man up, and you can't keep a first-class man down." Collins aspired to be a first-class man. After enrolling at Clemson University, Collins initially studied engineering, a field that he wasn't passionate about but that seemed like a promising opportunity. However, when his aunt remarked that Collins would "make an excellent lawyer," the idea of entering the legal profession was planted firmly in his mind. After graduating with a degree in English, Collins served in the Vietnam War, a life-changing experience that stretched his world view and "subjected [him] to leadership, bravery, and integrity."

Today, Collins serves as a lawyer and shares his passion and respect for the law and American history through his Constitution course at the University of South Carolina. As a legal, educational, and community leader, Collins exemplifies strong leadership.

## Leadership Lessons

*"Take risks!"* Collins believes success comes to those who are willing to challenge themselves and take risks. Strong leaders must lead by example and invest themselves in their work, but the most growth occurs through embracing challenge and "putting yourself out there."



# DR. EME CRAWFORD

Communications Director,  
Women's Rights Empowerment Network

## Turning Point

From her youth growing up in a rural town in Georgia, Eme Crawford recognized the many barriers that inhibited women's economic and social opportunities. As a student at Mercer University, Crawford was first exposed to social justice conversations centered on gender dynamics, racial equity, and the role of religion in affecting those issues. "It was new, fascinating, and energizing" for Crawford, and she began to lead initiatives to advocate for reproductive justice, a role that was both personally fulfilling and socially impactful.

After moving to Columbia, Crawford initially pursued a doctorate in rhetoric but was unfulfilled by the prospects of a career in academia. While finishing her doctorate, she began working part-time for New Morning Foundation to advocate for women's reproductive rights, a position that re-connected her to the social justice work that was enriching as an undergraduate and instilled in her a fresh energy and purpose. Following this direction, Crawford initially worked with New Morning Foundation before transitioning to lead the Women's Rights Empowerment Network (WREN), a new organization advocating for women's rights and opportunities.

## Empowering Communities

As a founding leader of WREN, Crawford strives to integrate women's issues into social and political actions throughout South Carolina. Recognizing people's fear of "engaging in [women's rights] conversations in the wrong way" as a missed opportunity, Crawford empowers others to discuss women's issues through digital campaigns, public events, and one-on-one conversations. This objective truly energizes her as she "breaks down the many barriers that are in the way of letting people do what they want to do." Throughout her work, Crawford constantly pushes herself to have uncomfortable conversations, to challenge herself by embracing the unfamiliar, and to always listen more than she talks. While constantly challenged by her work, Crawford has learned to become a more effective advocate, leader, and person by practicing self-compassion -- acknowledging her mistakes but always pushing forward.







**“It’s hard being a human in the world, and then to do challenging work too. I always want to be one of those people that after we have an interaction, someone feels good about and lifted up by that interaction.”**

### Leadership Lessons

*“Create a culture of humility.”* No one has everything completely figured out, but it is important to be humble enough to always be trying, accepting one’s mistakes but maintaining “the tenacity and humility to keep going.” Crawford works to illustrate this maxim through her leadership and work. In WREN’s first year, Crawford strove to build a strong culture of humility in order to create a supportive but progressive advocacy environment.

*“Build a cathedral rather than lay bricks.”* Crawford works to help herself and those around her see themselves as contributors to the big picture -- the cathedral -- instead of getting overly caught up in the exhausting minutiae of the daily work of laying bricks. This perspective motivates others to work toward a shared agenda and inspires collaboration and teamwork.



# HEATHER COOPER

Public Relations Director  
Soda City

## Turning Point

Having graduated from the University of South Carolina and moved to New York to pursue a career in public relations/marketing, Heather Cooper finds herself back in Columbia serving as the public relations director of Soda City. Discussing her initial interest in working for a PR firm in a major city and moving to NYC upon graduation, she explained how she realized the “New York life” was not for her. After spending some time in Orlando, Florida, Cooper knew that she wanted to return to Columbia to “find somewhere to set down roots.”

## Community Engagement

After joining the team at Soda City, Cooper described her passion to positively impact the Columbia community, improving it for the better. Comparing her work in Columbia to that of NYC, she was drawn back to South Carolina because she can more clearly and directly make an impact on the local community

## Leadership Lessons

*“The biggest thing in being a leader is having positive communication.”* In order to lead and empower others, leaders must be able to effectively explain a group’s objective and inspire a common mission. As a Public Relations director, Cooper understands the intricacies of good communication in order to build good public relationships, and she aims to incorporate this focus in her leadership.

*“It takes someone who trusts your team to be a leader.”* Cooper recognizes that different leadership styles exist, from those who inspire by what they say to those who lead by their actions on the ground. Yet despite the diverse leadership styles, she firmly believe trust is the foundation of strong leadership. According to Cooper, “you can’t lead if you don’t trust who you are working with and who’s under you,” and this mutual trust within a team can then enable effective leadership.





# DR. RAJEEV BAIS

Director, Carolina Survivor Clinic  
Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine  
University of South Carolina School of Medicine

## Turning Point

From a young age, Dr. Rajeev Bais had an inherent drive “to do the right thing in the world.” This personal mission was instilled in him by his parents and initially drove him to study religion due to its personal and impactful social role. However, after being encouraged by college classmates to look into healthcare, Bais explored medicine and found himself drawn to the study of infectious diseases. The social nature of the field again energized him, and he valued the opportunity to impact social and physical community health by investigating and addressing the underlying issues behind disease that limit human agency.

## Empowering Others

Bais expands upon his initial work to alleviate the root causes of disease in his current role as the director of the Carolina Survivor Clinic, the only holistic care center for refugees in South Carolina. Through a range of community programs, including school tutoring, youth soccer coaching, gardening projects, and free medical visits, he strives to address the social, economic, and health factors that limit a refugee’s agency. Bais firmly believes in the capacity for everyone to lead, and he empowers others to find their own leaders within themselves. Through his leadership, Bais creates a ripple effect “of doing good” by enabling others to

## Leadership Lessons

*“Taking the ego away from any act is important.”* Bais values humility as a core component of effective leadership. He recognizes the divisive quality of egos, and in his own work and support of others, he strives to be a humble and attentive leader. For Bais, “the biggest leadership trait is not to be a leader at all.”

*“Remodel our perspectives to allow creativity.”* Amidst the regulations and defined paths of education and economic systems, creativity and innovation can be easily dampened. Bais promotes freedom for creative approaches and solutions to problems in his medical and refugee care work. After intentionally seeking flexibility in his education and career, Bais aims to support others to find and develop original paths and opportunities.

***“Find joy in your life without the pressures to achieve something.”***



# REV. HELEN HARRISON COKER

Associate Pastor  
Saxe Gotha Presbyterian

## Turning Point

Rev. Helen Harrison Coker was active in her church community since her youth but did not anticipate a future in the ministry. As an undergraduate studying accounting, Coker says she first heard “God call [her], but [she] hung up.” Yet as she furthered her education in healthcare administration and worked in retirement communities, God kept hitting the “redial button.” While she loved her work, church, and community, Coker struggled to find a sense of peace and meaning. At the encouragement of her pastor, she visited seminaries to explore theological opportunities. On a visit to Princeton Seminary, Coker experienced an overwhelming “peace that passed all understanding” and entrusted her life to follow God’s calling into ministry, unsure at the time where a seminary degree would take her. This turning point ultimately led Coker to become an ordained minister and to serve at Saxe Gotha Presbyterian Church.

## A Life of Leadership

In the first year at seminary, Coker was regularly challenged by the diverse perspectives and opinions of her classmates and professors. However, this exposure to alternative beliefs and different viewpoints empowered Coker to accept her own identity, learning from others but always affirming her own values. This experience taught Coker the importance of conversing with people who disagree with her in order to be an informed leader and engaged citizen. She brings this ability to intentionally listen to other people’s point of view to her Christian and community leadership. Alongside strong interpersonal and communication skills, Coker believes leaders must lead by example and better their surrounding communities. As a female ordained minister, Coker accepts her calling from God to share her faith, inspiring others through her leadership and serving as a role model for other women in her church.



## Leadership Lessons

*“There’s a difference between being a leader and being responsible.”* As early as elementary school, Coker was identified as a natural leader by her teachers due to her innate sense of responsibility and ability. However, while appreciating these traits, Coker recognizes that responsibility alone does not define true leadership. Leadership extends beyond merely “getting the job done” to include genuine motivation and empowerment of others.

*“You must be stable through transitions and difficult times.”* While leaders must be flexible and dynamic in their work, stability and consistency is essential for leaders to be a strong support and foundation for others. Throughout her leadership journey, Coker aims to be stable, grounded, and aware of surrounding circumstances and events in order to be an effective and informed leader.





# DR. PATRICK HICKEY

Capstone Scholars Faculty Principal and  
Clinical Associate Professor of Nursing,  
University of South Carolina



## Turning Point

Growing up in rural Canada as the oldest of nine children in a family of Irish Catholics, Patrick Hickey grew up with an innate desire to help others. Unsure how to direct this energy, Hickey sought his high school counselor for guidance. Recognizing Hickey's caring nature, the counselor encouraged Hickey to consider nursing. Hesitant about entering a female-dominated field but at his counselor's insistence, Hickey attended a nursing recruitment presentation, an experience that changed his life when he heard the recruiter say, "nurses save lives." Motivated by this mission to save lives and help others, Hickey pursued a nursing degree, enduring teasing from male friends and disapproval within his own home. After a successful nursing career, Hickey pursues his passion for healthcare today through international mission work and university teaching to empower students to enter the healthcare field.

## Pushing the Limits

A hunger for personal challenge defines Hickey's career and life trajectory. As a nurse, Hickey challenged himself in his studies and work by pursuing further education in nursing and seeking out difficult positions within emergency rooms. This drive also inspired him to travel internationally, climbing the world's seven highest peaks and also delivering healthcare services in Latin and South America. Hickey views personal challenge as the basis for leadership and personal development, and he mentors and supports students to embrace challenge and to make a difference in the world. As Faculty Principal of Capstone Scholars at the University of South Carolina, Hickey established 'personal challenge' as a tenet of the program to push students to find their leadership strengths and personal passions.



## Leadership Lessons

*"Push the limits, always ask why, and never settle for someone saying you can't do that."* Hickey encourages all aspiring leaders to not only challenge themselves but also the world around them in order to understand systems and break down barriers. Through personal challenge, leaders can find the confidence to "go against the grain" and make a positive impact on others.

**"If a door of opportunity opens, go through it. If you like what's on the other side, great. If you don't like it, back out."**





# DR. LEMUEL WATSON

Professor of Educational Leadership and Policies,  
University of South Carolina

## Turning Point

Since his childhood, Lemuel Watson remembers having an innate sense of responsibility and sensitivity to the needs of others, attributes that naturally drew him into leadership positions -- first as a babysitter and later as a university dean. Yet despite this innate energy for supporting others, Watson had to learn to balance his natural introversion with a more extroverted public presence. He found his public voice in high school when fellow students pushed him to step up to the position of drum major in the school band. Through others' encouragement, Watson embraced this new challenge and discovered that he loved it. This experience inspired him to lead his classmates as student body president, and it was an important introduction into a formal leadership position.

## Leading Authentically

Watson served as Dean for the University of South Carolina's College of Education, and he attributes his success in this role to his innate sense of responsibility, desire to "get things done," and caring perspective. But recognizing that "you must do what you love and not just what you're good at," Watson returned to his calling of directly engaging with students as a faculty member.

Watson has learned to embrace himself and follow his true purpose, and he encourages his students to lead authentically by first understanding their own strengths, passions, and values to then "take those gifts to the world." Since his youth, Watson knows how meaningful it is to "know others are committed to your success." He strives to empower others to find their true calling by mentoring and supporting them along their educational, leadership, and personal journeys.

## Leadership Lessons

*"Spend enough silent time with yourself."* Among the daily professional and personal demands, it can be easy to sacrifice time alone. Watson has learned the importance of regular meditation and exercise to not only stay in physical health but also to allow time for personal reflection and self-care. This is essential for effective growth and personal confidence.

*"Listen to your inner voice. The greatest thing about leadership is having the courage to follow the purpose where you most are driven."* Watson has pushed himself to embrace new challenges personally and professionally, but he learned when to say no and when to pursue opportunities that fulfilled his purpose and passion for engaging with students.

***"I can look in the mirror, and I love the person looking back. I don't think there have been any mistakes. No mistakes, just lessons to be learned."***





# HILARY BRANNON

Communications and Events Director  
University of South Carolina

## Turning Point

Originally coming to the state to attend the University of South Carolina, Hilary Brannon has since found a home in and love for Columbia, “a big city that is still small enough that one person can make a significant difference.” After graduating, Brannon served in the USC Admissions Office but transitioned into a new role as Communications and Events Director to be more involved in leading student life initiatives. Despite her roles on campus, Brannon felt compelled to be more heavily involved in the local community, a passion that drove her to apply for the Columbia Leadership Academy, a 10 month leadership program to engage and train leaders to address local issues. This community leadership energizes and brings joy to Brannon, and she loves the opportunities to work with and learn from people from different backgrounds through her community and campus involvement. Now as director of the Columbia Leadership Academy and active member in the Junior League, Brannon continues to spread her love for helping others by steering organizations to serve and better her community.

## Leadership Lessons

*“Take every opportunity that comes your way.”* A trait she learned from her father, Brannon finds the best experiences come from opportunities where she says yes -- even if it seems out of her skillset or comfort zone. “Saying yes” pushes Brannon to grow as a leader constantly, and this acceptance of challenge is an important component of her leadership success.

*“Don’t be afraid to fail -- and sometimes fail really hard.”* Failure is a consistent fear that holds many back from embracing new opportunities, a weakness that Brannon strives to overcome by learning to “say yes” and by building good relationships with colleagues. Establishing a trusted support network gives Brannon the opportunity to challenge herself and fail along the way. Her resilient leadership pushes her to continue working hard to succeed at any challenge.

**“I haven’t found that one big goal yet.  
As long as I enjoy what I’m doing  
and I’m making an impact,  
that is my trajectory for now.”**



# PATTY CAVANAUGH

Executive Director  
American Board of Trial Advocates  
South Carolina Chapter

## Life Work

Patty Cavanaugh grew up confident in her intelligence and work ethic, but she did not initially plan to pursue opportunities outside of her hometown after high school. Recognizing her potential, Cavanaugh's high school English teacher encouraged her to apply for openings at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. Inspired by her teacher's encouragement, Cavanaugh accepted an administrative role in the FBI, moving to D.C. at the age of seventeen to begin her new life working while taking classes at George Washington University. While challenging, this opportunity inspired Cavanaugh to continue seeking opportunities to grow personally and professionally.

Today, Cavanaugh pursues her passion for serving others and "making them happy" through her work both in law and interior design. Serving on the American Board of Trial Advocates enables Cavanaugh to defend citizens' legal rights in court, while interior design allows her creative side to flourish.





# LAUREN WILKIE

Director of Programs  
Transitions Housing Shelter

## Turning Point

As a skilled musician, Lauren Wilkie initially set out for a career in musical therapy believing this would satisfy her love for music and of helping others. Yet after accepting a position at the Nurturing Center to care for disadvantaged youth, Wilkie's eyes were opened to the reality of poverty. This experience inspired her to pursue a social work degree in order to continue working for the community and empowering others. Today, Wilkie leads programs at Transitions, a temporary housing shelter for the homeless, and works to empower individuals to "live in life and all of the surrounding challenges."

## Working for the Community

Through her work, Wilkie follows her "passion for fixing things" by redesigning an organization or program's structures and policies to be the most effective and efficient. Using her training in social work, Wilkie accomplishes these objectives through effectively developing and managing teams, creating an empowering collaborative environment centered on open communication and listening. She believes that the best leaders are also followers, and she strives to listen to and support others as they find their own leadership path.



## Leadership Lessons

*“Build trust through open and honest communication.”* Wilkie builds personal relationships with her colleagues and clients, establishing mutual trust and respect through open and direct communication. Strong relationships are critical for effective collaboration and teamwork.

*“Ethics, efficiency, effectiveness, and empathy.”* Wilkie uses the “Four E’s” as guiding principles to interpret her life and work. Striving to account for these four factors in her work, Wilkie recognizes that one is off balance when something is wrong or troubling. Understanding these principles as fundamental factors in life and work, Wilkie discerns and addresses an imbalance to return to a state of well-being.



*“I am a social worker first. Transitions is lucky to house me, but I work for the community.”*



# TAMEIKA DEVINE

Councilwoman, Attorney  
Columbia City Council



## Turning Point

Since she was a child, Tameika Devine knew she wanted to be a lawyer. Following through on this conviction, Devine worked as a prosecutor for domestic violence cases following graduation from the University of South Carolina Law School. Aiming to establish a domestic violence court for Columbia, Devine submitted a proposal to City Council but was denied funding. Frustrated by this outcome but looking for opportunities to affect change, Devine decided to run for a seat on City Council. The campaign was difficult and tiring, but Devine stayed energized by the chance to serve her community in this capacity. Upon winning the contested seat, Devine became the first African American woman on City Council and a force for good in the Columbia community.

## Council Leadership

As a Councilwoman, Devine recognizes and addresses issues affecting individuals from all walks of life. Establishing a domestic violence court, promoting healthy lifestyles, and empowering women leaders are a handful of the many efforts that Devine is passionate about bringing to the Columbia community. She is motivated “knowing that [she has] the ability to affect real change” and constantly works toward doing the right thing for her community. Through her work, she strives to create opportunities for others and to empower them to take advantage of those opportunities. Devine acts to be a role model, especially for young women, and her successful leadership opens doors for African Americans and women to enter public service in the Midlands.



## Leadership Lessons

*“Be open to everything.”* Effective leaders must be able to listen to and empathize with everyone in order for others to feel heard and valued. Through her legal and City Council experience, Devine values the ability to see others’ perspectives and to be willing to change her own opinion. Empathy and openness to others is essential to “do the right thing” as a community leader.

*“Forget a mentor, get a sponsor. Mentors are wonderful, but sponsors open doors for you.”* Inspired by a book on the subject of mentorship, Devine values the idea of sponsors that will really invest in others’ development and support them in finding new opportunities. “Sponsors are must haves.”

***“My parents taught me to be the change you want to see, and they instilled in me the confidence that I could do anything.”***







# ERIN HALL

Chief Executive Officer  
Palmetto Association for Children and Families

## Turning Point

Erin Hall found her love for supporting young people early in her life and career. When she joined a new youth leadership initiative launched by the March of Dimes in high school, Hall first discovered opportunities within the nonprofit sector to volunteer, fundraise, and advocate for women and youth health issues. This experience changed her life, and she found a new joy in working with young people, a passion that would continue to direct her life journey. After graduating from the University of South Carolina, Hall returned to the non-profit sector to work for the March of Dimes as a youth leader and communications director.

## Her Leadership Story

After working in communications for several years, Hall recognized the need to embrace a new challenge and accepted a position as Director of Palmetto Place Children's Shelter. It was a unique but challenging opportunity to help vulnerable children and teens in her role at Palmetto Place, but "it was the most amazing job [she's] ever had" to directly serve and empower youth. Hall continues to support youth across South Carolina in her current role, and while it is challenging, she finds energy in supporting others, whether it's reenergizing a board of directors, assembling a volunteer committee, or inspiring her employees to take on new projects. Through her extensive experience working with people, Hall has learned the importance of relationship building to establish personal connections that can enable successful collaboration. She utilizes the power of storytelling to build those critical relationships and to highlight the human faces behind her work. To best serve these children, Hall strives to bring diverse voices to the decision table, intentionally surrounding herself with gender, racial, and socioeconomic diversity in order to best understand and tell the full story of youth welfare in South Carolina.

## Leadership Lessons

*"It's all about relationship building."* While it takes time to build up healthy relationships, Hall understands the value of establishing relationships to enable effective collaboration and mutual respect with others. Hall goes into conversations without an end objective in mind to focus on building that relationship rather than asking for anything.

*"Don't be afraid of the butterflies."* Once she stops feeling the excited and nervous butterflies in her work, Hall recognizes "that it's time to move on" to embrace a new challenge and grow in new ways. Being aware of yourself enables you to recognize and follow new opportunities that can bring personal and professional challenges that inspire growth and impact.

*"I'm very independent, and I'm going to do what I want to do. Watching [my mentor] to see it's okay to be female, to have a strong personality, and to speak up for yourself was very impactful for me."*





# DR. JEAN WEINGARTH

Director, Koger Center  
University of South Carolina



## Turning Point

Jean Weingarth has, from a young age, understood the value of hard work and building strong relationships with those around you. Having worked in the “dead books” section at her undergraduate university’s library, Weingarth saw how people often get so comfortable in their professional positions that they never consider a change. She knows that while these people may be happy with their positions, it is important to be open to taking risks and to accept when one’s passion changes over time. Coming to the Koger Center after working at the University of South Carolina President’s House, Weingarth says her role is to ensure operations at the performing arts center run smoothly from “the stage to the street.” However, she does not define herself solely by her work at the Center. She works closely with undergraduate students and is highly involved in her church community.

## Student Engagement

Evident by her work and passions, Weingarth prioritizes her commitment to helping and enriching the lives of students at the University of South Carolina by serving as an instructor to U101 classes and employing them to work at the Koger Center. She acts as a mentor in the classroom, at the Koger Center, and beyond, encouraging students to meet their full potential by teaching them professional and interpersonal fundamentals. She believes strongly in the value of relationships, basic manners, as well as a willingness to work at every level within an organization, never asking anyone to do something she would not do herself. Regarding questions about finding your passion, she says that “elimination is a form of choice,” and what is important is to go out and try.

## Leadership Lessons

*“I never ask anything I don’t do myself.”* Weingarth values leaders who “are willing to work at every level.” Whether its picking up trash or cleaning the bathrooms, Weingarth is always willing to support her team in any capacity. This servant leadership builds a humble and collaborative team environment and enables Weingarth to be an effective and trusted leader.



# ADVICE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Interviewees were asked to share advice to young graduates as they prepare to enter their next stage of life.

These parting words of wisdom often clearly related to each individual's life stories and lessons learned. They offer hopeful and thoughtful messages for others to consider as they shape their life trajectories.





*"I think getting a variety of experiences is good. I know this is a hard market and people have to compromise [on their dream], but go volunteer with your passion. There are a lot of ways that you can make a difference. Work experience isn't the only way to achieve your passion."* - Ann Timberlake

*"Find a way to help others. When I was in college, I did a lot of [various volunteering opportunities]. I got a lot of experience and figured out what I didn't want to do, but I also found that what I was interested in people and making things better."* - Mayor Elise Partin

*"Say yes, within reason — that's a balance I'm learning to be able to say no. Embrace challenges — even those that don't match perfectly with your skillset."* - Hilary Brannon

*"Keep going. Even if things aren't working out the way you envision they would. You don't have control over everything, but you have control over some things so just keep pushing forward and have faith in that process."* - Eme Crawford

*"Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Take it, learn from it, and move onward."* - Erin Hall

*"Pay attention, be aware, be present, and be engaged. Put down your phone and listen to others intentionally. Don't think it's all about me or you won't be effective on a team."* - Leslie Te-treault

*"Read, read, read! Be informed and engaged, and be a part of the bigger conversation."* - Joel Collins

*"Don't always wait for an opportunity - create your own!"*  
- Tameika Devine

*"Don't lose your magic. People get frustrated and cynical. If you truly want to be an effective leader, you have to help others realize their dreams. You have to keep the magic alive for them."*  
- Kirk Randazzo

*"Get mentors and get more than one. Those who have been in the field. Volunteer different places and do different things. Get as much experience as you can -- and if you can do a variety of jobs in the first few years do that so you can find the place you really want to do things."* - Lauren Wilkie

*"No matter what you're given or the choices that you have, do the best with what you have. Do the job to your utmost ability, and stay positive. Opportunities come to those who are positive."* - Dr. Rajeev Bais

*"Don't give up. If it's something you're really passionate about don't worry about others, and just do what you need to do as best as you can. Keep moving forward."* - Dr. Lemuel Watson

*"Build relationship(s) in whatever job you're in, showing that you're eager and willing to do whatever it takes to get a job done."* - Robin Waites

*"Listen to other people's stories. It's amazing what you can learn about people and about life. Always ask people about themselves because you never know what they're going to say."*  
- Rev. Helen Harrison Coker





## THE BOTTOM LINE

Our motivation to conduct this leadership project came from our frustrations and concerns about our own personal and professional paths. Through researching leadership theory and interviewing individuals who exhibit leadership and display significant community contributions, we have showcased instances of leadership across many professions. The primary purpose of this project is to explore what turning points, motivations, and life decisions led community leaders in the South Carolina Midlands to their current leadership positions in the hopes that these stories will inspire others. After interviewing all project participants and conducting a literature review of leadership and identity theory, we have made several conclusions via a qualitative comparison of interviewee responses.

First, in understanding the experiences that led to leaders' career paths and passions, three predominant patterns of turning points appeared within their stories: 1) a significant experience was identified that greatly modified perspectives or goals, 2) an existing interest or passion was enriched or directed by external experiences, and 3) others encouraged or empowered them to take action along a particular path.

Second, the life changing experiences discussed above affected the participants' sense of passion and sense of purpose. The discussion of passion emerged in two distinct ways amongst those interviewed. Passion was discussed either 1) as specific objectives directly related to a person's work or 2) as general concepts that were pursued through other avenues.

Finally, several common leadership lessons and personal strengths recurred throughout the interviews, either expressed directly by the participants or observed holistically by the authors. When looking at the characteristics and behaviors that the interviewees described as making up a good leader, we see the concepts of self-reflection, emotional intelligence, and challenging oneself became apparent commonalities.



Through the research and interviews conducted, we have both found this project personally enriching and inspiring. As we prepare to embark on our professional journeys, we will take the interviewees' words with us. We strive to actively seek or create opportunities that constantly challenge us, that enable us to impact our communities, and that allow us to learn from others' diverse perspectives while also staying true to our own values. The importance of active reflection and self-compassion was reinforced in both the literature and interviews conducted. As a major takeaway from this project, we intend to be more intentional about reflecting on our experiences and goals to further enable leadership growth and personal identity development.

By shaping and affirming our own identities, building our self-confidence, and recognizing our strengths and weaknesses, we can grow into impactful professional and community leaders. It is our hope that through archiving and creating a photobook of these Midlands leaders, others will also be inspired by these leaders' actions and words.





